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# Artificial reefs serve as remembrances at sea

By [Frank Stephenson](#) August 18, 2025











On Aug. 13, the waters off Apalachicola and Carrabelle quietly received three massive, permanent tributes to the memories of people whose lives intersected with the Gulf in ways both deeply personal and professional.

Orchestrated by the Apalachicola Artificial Reef Association (AARA) working in conjunction with the Tallahassee-based Organization for Artificial Reefs (OAR), the day-long project saw the precise placement of 65 custom-built, concrete, multi-ton, pyramid-shaped units, the largest of which now stand 15 feet tall on the seafloor.

The successful mission – three years in planning and design – signifies a longstanding commitment by both nonprofit reef-building groups to keep expanding Franklin County's marine habitat for a myriad of marine organisms and a fleet of enthusiastic followers wielding rods and reels and dive gear.

Alan Richardson, head of OAR's board of directors, said the project was staged out of Orange Beach, Alabama, home to marine contractor Walter Marine. The company has for years been recognized as the largest reef-building operation in the country with reportedly more than 70,000 reef projects already under its belt.



“We’ve enjoyed many years working with Walter Marine,” Richardson said. “These people are reef-building pros without peer.”

This latest deployment targeted two existing reefs for expansion and created an entirely new one, Richardson said. The first stop early Wednesday morning was at the Buddy Ward Memorial Reef site, located roughly nine miles south of the Bob Sikes Cut in state waters. The reef, which lies in 40 feet of water, memorializes Olan “Buddy” Ward (1953-2006), a major figure in Apalachicola’s seafood industry for decades and considered the “patriarch” of the area’s shrimping industry by friends and associates.

Apalachicola’s Capt. Grayson Shepard, founder and president of AARA, said expanding the Ward reef site involved adding 33 reef units, including six individualized memorial reefs within the same permitted area.

Memorials were made in the names of Andrew Augusta “Gus” Pitts; James Kenneth Duffes; Danyelle Sherese Copeland; Charles “Chad” Edward Gunter; Clint “Bud’ Hubert Kadel and Victor Edwards, he said.



Second stop for Walter Marine's crew aboard the R/V Maranatha II, towing material and a crane on a 110-foot barge, was 31 miles eastward. This deployment saw the creation of an all-new reef, located roughly 18 miles southeast of the easternmost shores of Dog Island in 73 feet of water.

This new site commemorates William "Bill" Mickler (1947-2024), a longstanding and dedicated volunteer for OAR projects. Mickler, a Florida State alumnus, was a retired officer with the Florida Department of Transportation and a serious saltwater angler and conservationist who spent many years serving in various volunteer capacities with OAR and the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA), Richardson said.

"I can't think of a more apt tribute to Bill's marine advocacy for anglers through CCA and OAR than the creation of a massive artificial reef in his memory. Bill would have been very proud of this," he said.

Deployed were a total of 19 units, including three "super" reefs that help make up the core of the Mickler Reef matrix. For all the projects, OAR and AARA used a combination of "super" units – by far the largest, most imposing commercial reef units currently available – and smaller units called FLARS (Florida Limestone Artificial Reef Systems). The super units are 15 feet tall and weigh roughly 26,000 pounds each, whereas the FLARS units stand eight feet tall and weigh roughly 6,000 pounds apiece.

The final stop for Walter Marine lay only a quarter mile from the Mickler reef. In 2023 OAR began this tribute to the life of Air Force Staff Sgt. Carl Philippe Enis (1986-2018) with the idea of expanding it as funding became available. By noon, the reef-builders had lowered 13 units to the seafloor into precise positions 68 feet down guided by a GPS system mounted on the top of the crane's giant arm.

A Miami Beach native, Enis was an FSU graduate who served as a rescue parachutist, specially trained to treat and rescue military personnel stranded in often dangerous areas. He, along with six of his team

members, perished in 2018 when their helicopter crashed on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The multi-talented Enis was a passionate outdoorsman who loved big game fishing and hunting and scuba diving in the Gulf.

OAR and AARA teamed up to obtain all the permitting and fundraising required for the project. All told, Richardson said this latest mission cost \$202,000 and included funding from the Florida Wildlife and Conservation Commission, CRC, OAR, AARA and a variety of private sources including friends and families of those being memorialized. Tax money raised through the sale of fishing licenses and equipment make up the bulk of state funding for public artificial reef construction in Florida.

“We have now created at least 31 reefs that permanently memorialize individuals whose lives were enriched by their association with our coastal waters,” Richardson said. “Anyone interested in establishing a lasting tribute to a loved one might want to consider this option at sea.”

*Frank Stephenson is a retired magazine editor, a charter captain and long-time advocate for marine conservation.*

## New fishing hot spots

*The newest additions to Franklin County’s constellation of public artificial reefs include three memorial reefs within easy striking distance of Apalachicola and Carrabelle. Here are the GPS coordinates for the geographical centers of reefs built on Aug. 12. (For a complete listing of coordinates and more detailed information about OAR’s memorial reef program, visit OAR’s website at [oarreefs.org](http://oarreefs.org).)*

**Buddy Ward Memorial Reef:** 29° 29.136’ 84° 56.032’

**Carl Enis Memorial Reef:** 29° 35.426’ 84° 25.383’

**Bill Mickler Memorial Reef:** 29° 35.340’ 84° 25.679’

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